

**Gay Spirituality as a New Religious Movement:
Old Wine in New Bottles?**

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You would be entirely justified this afternoon to ask the question why a paper on gay spirituality is being presented in the context of a conference on new religious movements. I have asked myself this same question. Taking my cue from the title of this particular session, I am not sure which is more “controversial”: gay spirituality in and of itself, or the question of whether it is, in fact, a new religious movement. Hopefully, what you are about to hear will go some distance in reassuring you on the appropriateness of my presence here today.

I wish to make a clear affirmation from the start. I am not putting forth the proposition that, as scholars of religion, we should view gay spirituality as a new religious movement in the formal, sociological sense of the word. But I do believe, as I will be arguing, that this burgeoning field, for lack of a better term, partakes of many of the significant characteristics of such a movement, particularly as concerns the cultural values which it espouses. This is only a preliminary analysis; my intent is to pose some hypotheses for future research. I also want to state that my presentation will focus on gay male spirituality. Lesbian spirituality, which has been heavily influenced by developments in feminist theology and hermeneutics, would merit a serious discussion on its own. First, however, a very schematic historical overview might be in order.

Ever since the 1969 Stonewall riots, the mythic foundational event of modern gay liberation, one can say that the concern with the sacred in the lives of gay men has

been growing. Before that time, of course, institutionalized religion still existed, but it was understood and perceived -- and rightly so -- as being one element of a vast panoply of social and cultural institutions which oppressed homosexuals and instilled them with fear and self-loathing. If there was any form of gay spirituality during this period, it was more akin to the countercultural beliefs and rituals which were normative in the Sixties -- something which, even today, has not been lost. The founders of the earliest gay rights organizations, for example, were heavily involved with groups such as the Radical Faeries, which combined androgyny and Native American traditions with California-type New Age rituals.

The post-Stonewall era saw the development of organized religious institutions geared specifically to the spiritual needs of gays and lesbians. The Metropolitan Community Church, even though it was founded in 1968, and the flourishing of such groups as the Roman Catholic "Dignity" are examples of this. The motif of traditional religion, specifically Christianity, as an oppressive force certainly remained, but now the effort was geared more to a recuperation of organized religion and to a re-reading of Scripture in light of the gay experience. It is during this period that the groundbreaking works by John McNeill, The Church and the Homosexual, and by John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, were published. Both books were instrumental in the development of a uniquely gay perspective on the Christian tradition.

It is undeniably the AIDS crisis which has had the most significant and dramatic effect on the quest for a gay spirituality, and understandably so. The immediacy and impact of death as a communal experience -- and its dramatic association with the sexual force -- invariably bring questions of faith to the fore. The period since the mid-1980s has been characterized by an outpouring of books on all aspects of gay spirituality, from the theological justifications for same-sex marriage to collections of essays on the religious experience of gay men -- to say nothing of those dealing with the moral and ethical issues posed by AIDS.

I propose to explore the topic of gay spirituality from a threefold perspective. First, I will discuss the cultural values and some of the key theological themes which it espouses. Second, I will describe a unique experiment in gay monasticism which is being tried in rural Pennsylvania. Finally, I will attempt to answer the question whether gay spirituality, as a form of alternate religious expression, is really a minor variation on a very traditional religious tune.

It is important to understand that the growth of gay spirituality is a uniquely American phenomenon, just as modern gay liberation had its origins in American culture. Frank Browning, author of The Culture of Desire, makes the following very interesting observation on the parallels between gay liberation and Protestant Evangelicalism: "Evangelical Christians speak about "receiving Christ" and

undergoing the rapture of the Holy Spirit, through which they, too, say they are born again. If the still new language of American gay liberation sounds remarkably like the Protestant language of reawakening and being born again, it is hardly accidental. For more than three hundred years American culture has been shaped by the paradigm of rebirth in the promised land. Queer activists' embrace of terms like "safe space" and "liberated zones" falls easily into that tradition, just as nineteenth-century utopian socialist communities did and as twentieth-century spiritual cultists do. As radically different as their particular faiths and ideologies may be, the underlying spirit is a profoundly American faith in rebirth, both individual and collective, in a place where we will come to a revolutionary comprehension of our place in relation to God or nature." (Bouldrey, p. 114).

While born-again Christians may recoil in horror at these kinds of similitudes being proposed, I believe Browning is most perceptive in his analysis, for there can be little doubt that the religious paradigms which have shaped American culture remain very potent, including within the gay community itself. In a way, therefore, there is a very old-fashioned motif to gay spirituality: it partakes of a long tradition of belief in the possibility of self-actualization, both individually and collectively.

It is this self-actualization which is the predominant theme in most gay spiritual writings, for the vast majority of them are concerned with issues of psychological

health. In itself, of course, coming out -- the defining life experience for gay men -- is the very epitome of self-actualization. Its similarities with certain aspects of the conversion experience are fairly self-evident. Gay spirituality -- in fact, most gay discourse -- attempts to legitimize the coming out process by reference to two powerful cultural norms: first, the individual has the obligation to uncover his true self (the therapeutic); second, the citizen has the right to define publicly his identity (the political). To do both is to attain psychological health and balance.

Beyond this, however, gay spirituality relies heavily on an old Christian concept: that of grace. Sexuality is a gift from God, and it is a gift precisely because it is so varied in its manifestations. Being gay is therefore a blessing. This is a deliberate effort to counteract the traditional religious understanding of homosexuality as sinful, immoral, or worthy of damnation. What is important is that the individual accept his true self: the self given by God. In this is genuine psychological and spiritual maturity. One writer even makes the claim that good theology is good psychology, and vice versa. It is quite evident here that gay spirituality adopts the theme of "emotional well-being as spiritual illumination" which is so prevalent in new religious movements of the psycho-therapeutic variety. There is also a type of gay spirituality which has close affinities with the so-called men's movement, in its heavy emphasis on myth, story-telling, and the creation of heroes and communal rituals. Will Roscoe is the best representative of this approach.

Needless to say, gay spirituality holds a radically different view of the body -- and, in consequence, of sexuality -- from that of formal religion, especially the Judeo-Christian tradition. The body as source of pleasure -- as prime mediating agent in the structuring of a relation of playfulness with the world -- is a recurring and omnipresent theme. The body and sexuality are good things, to be enjoyed as manifestations of the sacred. What is particularly striking is the complete break which is effected between sexuality and monogamy, as opposed to the very powerful contrary message which is found in most, if not all, traditional religions. While this may not be surprising in itself, it does point to a fundamental shift in the theological understanding of the body as the instrument of procreation -- in essence, because same-sex sexual acts are, by their very nature, non-procreative.

As will be expected, gay spirituality generally adopts a very critical stance vis-à-vis mainstream religious denominations. While so-called "gay churches" and the like are viewed as positive elements in the gay collective identity, and as necessary social institutions, traditional religion, because of its association with repression and homophobia, is often rejected outright. Some authors, notably former Catholic priest John McNeill, try very hard, however, to cull the most gay-positive elements from established teachings, often with remarkable success. But gay spirituality is definitely alternative theology, in both its intent and its rhetoric. Any attempt to make it more mainstream would, in fact, render it quite meaningless and sterile.

There is, however, another type of gay spirituality which is much more closely allied to the New Age, and which adopts and reinterprets several of its major themes. I wish to describe one such attempt: the Harmonists of Christiansbrunn Brotherhood, a self-contained, marginal experiment in gay monasticism located in rural Pennsylvania. To the best of my knowledge, its sole permanent members are its two founders.

The teachings of the Brotherhood are an eclectic mix. Describing themselves as a "post-Christian religion," they limit their membership to gay men. Their general information brochure refers to them in the following terms: "We are a religious order of Single Brothers, androgynous as Adam in the beginning, now returning to take our place in the Garden, and understanding it for the first time. No longer children, now we are the Garden's guardian angels. We are the Woman of the Wilderness, waiting daily for the Divine Bridegroom to fill us and make us whole." (This quote, as with all subsequent quotes, is taken from general information material issued by the Brotherhood.) In a Q & A fact sheet which they put out, they further state the following: "As gay people, we have an intuitive sense as to what it means to fill and to be filled. We can use this by letting the Holy Spirit enter us in a literal sense. This holds true for men and women. It is a special relationship with the Holy Spirit, not creating physical life, but spiritual life." Notice here the rather unique theological twist which is given to the Judeo-Christian story of the Garden of

Eden, as well as to the biological act of sexual intercourse.

The Brotherhood claims somewhat mystical origins in the person of Christian Renatus Graf von Zinzendorf, apparently homosexual son of Moravian leader Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. Christian Renatus lived from 1727 to 1752; he died at the age of twenty-five. He was supposedly visited by Jesus Christ during his short life; the two became lovers. A great deal of the theology of Christian Renatus was centred on the five wounds of Christ, and imagery of blood and penetration abound. Filled with the Holy Spirit, in the literal as well as the spiritual sense, Christian Renatus acquired a monastic following, called the Single Men's Choir, which became a source of scandal among Moravians. Christian Renatus was silenced, and his followers, it is claimed, fled Germany for Pennsylvania, where they established a cloister in the expectation that their teacher would join them, though he never did. After the death of Christian Renatus, the monastery simply fell apart. Today's Harmonist Brotherhood views itself as descending directly from this lineage. Though the historical facts may be tenuous, this "myth of the origins" can act as a powerful legitimizing force in terms of the identity of any group -- however marginal the group or outlandish their particular discourse.

The Brotherhood appears to have very little formal rituals, apart from spontaneous

prayers, readings and chanting at day's end, in particular honour of Mother Earth. There is no monastic garb. They adopt an Amish-like approach to modern comforts, emphasizing self-reliance, farming and crafts. They are not chaste. Sex is permitted only between brothers, but one cannot take a lover. They follow the Six Fold Path, described as "....the process by which the Holy Spirit comes to know itself and become enlightened." Each day, the Brothers must focus on one of the six themes of perception, recognition, acceptance, judgement, change and reflection. From this Path, it is claimed, comes the "....discipline of behaviours, of how to act when one is One, the Holy Spirit." These disciplines are threefold: empathetic (not blaming), patient (not shaming), and nurturing (not violent, either psychic or physical).

The similarities between the Harmonist Brotherhood and what is usually referred to as New Age-type religious movements are found at many levels. First, the reference to a golden time of innocence -- in this case, the Garden of Eden -- as both historical reference point and utopian vision for the group, is a fairly standard motif. It is also not surprising that the members are referred to as guardian angels, since angels as intermediary beings between humans and the divine are a common theme in New Age thought. Second, nature and the environment are omnipresent; Mother Earth (Mutter Erde) and the Holy Spirit -- this latter understood in terms of a manifestation or form of consciousness -- are the Brotherhood's primary

divinities. There is also an important ecological mission of preservation of, and caring for, nature. Third, there is a strong oriental and psycho-therapeutic flavour to the group's Six Fold Path. It is an eclectic mixture -- such eclecticism being, in itself, one of the most remarkably defining characteristics of New Age thought.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I am not suggesting that we consider gay spirituality as a new religious movement in the sense that we have traditionally understood such movements. I do believe, however, that we can most definitely label gay spirituality as an alternate form of religious expression, if not religious consciousness -- much as is the case, for example, with certain forms of feminist spirituality or with a variety of New Age beliefs. The more significant question, in my estimation, is whether, in fact, gay spirituality is not simply a minor variation on the old religious theme of salvation, specifically of the Judeo-Christian variety. Is it "old wine in new bottles?" If not, in what sense is it truly "new?" There can be little doubt as to the cultural origins of gay spirituality, particularly in relation to the appearance of gay liberation in the United States. But where else can it be said to emerge from?

There is, most obviously, the theological content. I have already indicated some of the elements of this theology: being gay is a blessing, the body and sexuality are good things, procreation is not the sole purpose of human sexual intercourse. In essence,

the fully self-accepting gay individual is the mature spiritual individual. The close associations with psychological theories of self-development and mental health have been noted.

A more important and significant feature of this theology, I would suggest, is the concern with salvation -- in itself, the very domain and raison d'être of all religions, including those which claim to be "new." In gay spirituality, this concern with being saved operates at two levels. In the first instance, there is the individual acceptance of one's sexual orientation as an act of faith in the goodness of God. In other words, God would not have created same-sex attraction if it were not a good thing. In understanding and accepting this, the individual, by overcoming self-doubt and self-hatred, is already saved. The other understanding of salvation has to do with the gay community as a force for change in history. In this perspective, gays and lesbians are playing a critical role -- particularly at this time of anxiety engendered by AIDS -- in saving the world, as it were, from its own intolerance and lack of compassion. The gay community, in leading by example, becomes the agent of human salvation. One of the reasons why gays can do this is because of their marginal status as sexual outcasts: in itself, a source of pride and an impetus for social and cultural change. In the words of theologian and psychotherapist John McNeill: "At the heart of all gay spiritual life is a process of mourning and accepting our status as exiles in this world." (Taking a Chance on

God, p. 38). In addition, this work of salvation partakes of creation; it helps bring about the "new earth" of biblical fame.

It is my general conclusion that gay spirituality -- quite apart from the fact that it certainly does play a very positive role in gay affirmation, both individually and collectively -- is a contemporary reinterpretation of some old Judeo-Christian values and beliefs. Central to this is the theme of salvation. While some of its other components, in fact, may be in direct opposition to traditional Catholic teachings, for example, the core message of personal and communal redemption remains. In this sense, gay spirituality really is "old wine in new bottles." Even the Christiansbrunn Brotherhood, despite its eclecticism and its somewhat esoteric view of the world, mimics the Christian monastic lifestyle -- all in an attempt to attain salvation and enlightenment.

Gay spirituality is an integral part of the new and not-so-new landscape of religious pluralism, though certainly not as a major player. Essentially, it is a way for gay men to make sense of their life experience and to feel loved and accepted by a divinity which appears to have only too often rejected them, sometimes very harshly. It can be asked: Can one really ask for anything more from any contemporary spirituality?

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